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Radio Marti and Cuban Interference

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Following is a statement by Thomas O. Enders, Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs, before the Subcommittee on Telecommunications, Consumer Protection, and Finance of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, May 10, 1982. Radio Marti is a U.S. Government proposal to establish radio broadcasting to Cuba.

I would like to set the record straight concerning Cuban interference with American broadcasting. The serious problem of Cuban interference with the radio broadcasting of its neighbors, including the United States, is separate and distinct from the Radio Marti question. Serious Cuban interference has been going on for over a decade, long before Radio Marti was even an idea. More recently, 2 years and one administration before Radio Marti was announced, Cuba made known plans for stations that would cause much added interference. Today Cuba is continuing its interference, and Radio Marti is not even on the air. In fact, Cuba's broadcasting plans that will result in increased interference for American broadcasters will probably be implemented with or without Radio Marti as a scapegoat. And if Cuba did not have Radio Marti it would find another pretext.

Radio Marti

Radio Marti is intended to provide the Cuban people with an alternate, reliable source of news and commentary about events taking place in their homeland. It is intended to supply what the Cuban public is missing—reliable news about Cuban life, features, sports and entertainment; alternatives to the distorted, censored news and programming that is being offered by a government that rules not for the people but for itself.

Radio Marti is a proposal to give Cubans the means they now lack to know what kind of a society has been imposed on them, to furnish them with a source of news and entertainment that is not manipulated by the state, to let them find out what is really happening in their country, to inform them why so many have gone off to foreign military duty not always to return, and to learn what the state really does with the wealth of the Cuban people.

Cuban Radio Interference

But long before Radio Marti, in the mid-1960s the Castro government embarked on a program to redesign its domestic AM broadcasting system and to initiate broadcasting directed toward the United States and other neighboring countries. Most of the new stations were in direct violation of its treaty obligations under the North American regional

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broadcasting agreement and resulted in harmful interference to long-established stations in the United States, Mexico, and other countries in the Caribbean.

From the mid-1960s through 1979, the level of interference caused to AM stations in the United States by Cuban stations steadily increased. This interference primarily affected AM stations in Florida and along the gulf coast. Since 1967, WQBA, a Spanish-language station in Miami, has been and still is being intentionally jammed by Cuba, using tones offset from the carrier frequency of WQBA. This jamming has also adversely affected WRVA, a co-channel station in Richmond, Virginia.

In late 1979, in preparation for the regional broadcasting conference, Cuba submitted an inventory of radio station requirements to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) which, if implemented, would greatly increase the level of interference which would be caused to AM broadcasting stations in the United States and most other countries within the region. Included in this inventory were two 500 kilowatt (kw) stations—10 times the amount of power authorized in the United States and elsewhere in North America—plus a number of other moderate and high-power stations also capable of causing considerable interference in the United States. The Cubans have never explained why they wanted such enormous power, but the reason is obvious—since 1979 they have planned to increase their ability to propagandize their neighbors.

Beginning in 1980, more and more complaints of harmful interference were received from AM stations in the United States as Cuba began implementing this inventory. Stations as far north as New England and as far west as Indiana were recording serious interference from Cuban stations. Part of this interference resulted from Cuban rebroadcasting of Radio Moscow in English using transmitter powers of up to 150 kw.

Prior to the second session of the regional AM broadcasting conference in Rio de Janeiro last fall, the United States held three rounds of technical-level discussions with the Government of Cuba in an attempt to explore means to reduce our mutual interference problems. While it appeared that some of the problems could be resolved, throughout the discussions it was very clear that both countries had stations in their inventory that were not negotiable. For the United States this was our existing Voice of America (VOA) station in Marathon, Florida, and for Cuba it was their two planned 500 kw stations. At the last of these three meetings, in Washington, D.C., in August of 1981, Cuba remained firm in its intention to implement these 500 kw stations and further informed us that they would be shifting the frequencies of these stations to 1040 and 1160 kilohertz (kHz). This preceded announcement of Radio Marti on September 23 and formal identification on October 29 of 1040 kHz as the best frequency for Radio Marti.

While we were aware of Cuban interest in 1040, accepting Cuba's plan would have meant accepting destruction of WHO Des Moines by a 500 kw superstation. Our own plans were carefully crafted to cause no such damage. We, therefore, took our case to the relevant international forum, the regional conference, where we were vindicated.

During that conference in Rio we held discussions with the Cubans and reached an agreement on a procedure in which the engineers on our respective delegations would get together to begin working out the resolution of specific interference problems. However, the Cubans refused to follow through with bilateral meetings, paralleling the conference approach, a procedure which all other delegations were using to resolve incompatibilities between stations.

Instead, Cuba submitted to the planning committee of the conference, on a "take it or leave it basis," 48 frequency changes which, while resolving some of the incompatibilities between Cuban stations and those of some of its neighbors, shifted the remaining incompatibilities onto frequencies occupied by U.S. stations, resulting in an increased level of interference to U.S. stations. Two important U.S. stations affected would be KSL in Salt Lake City, Utah, on 1160 kHz and WHO in Des Moines, Iowa, on 1040 kHz. The U.S. delegation was successful in getting the Rio conference to reject this proposal but the Cuban delegation refused to accept the conference's decisions and withdrew.

Later, Cuba notified the ITU that it would ignore the assignment plan adopted by the conference and the decisions made there which rejected their 48 frequency changes. Cuba said it would implement its 48 changes regardless of its international obligations.

Cuba has, in fact, implemented important parts of its plan. Cuba's second superstation on 1160 kHz has been on the air using at least 100 kw of its planned 500 kw power and has severely reduced KSL Salt Lake's secondary nighttime service area from 750 to 50–60 miles. WHO, on 1040, has thus far been spared, perhaps in hope that this Cuban threat would incite an active campaign by interested parties to kill Radio Marti.

We are seriously concerned about Cuban damage to all U.S. stations and, indeed, when Cuba threatens any U.S. interest. But we cannot allow Cuban threats of outlaw behavior to dictate our foreign policy.

The Federal Communications Commission can comment on the effect the Cuban inventory of stations as modified by their 48 frequency changes would have on U.S. domestic broadcasting.

The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) has done its own analysis of these 48 frequency changes and has found that AM radio stations in 32 states plus the District of Columbia will experience interference and reduced listening areas should Cuba implement in full its proposed inventory. Altogether, over 200 U.S. stations will be affected. The NAB study shows that 10 clear channel radio stations will lose their nighttime coverage, 37 clear channel stations would lose large portions of their wide area coverage, and only 6 clear channel stations would continue to provide interference-free service.

Some people say that the threat from Cuba is too great; Radio Marti will invite massive Cuban jamming, interference, retaliation. They say, change frequencies and hurt someone else, not me, or they suggest using another system—FM, short wave, TV, out-of-band AM, anything. Some even seem to imply we should abandon our plans out of fear.

Cuban interference is a problem, a serious problem, because international radio broadcasting is based on cooperation. But Cuban interference is not a new problem because Cuba long ago chose to act as an outlaw. Cuba's lawlessness predates Radio Marti and will continue to exist in the future—with or without this new station.

The truth is that we do not know for certain what Cuba will do to interfere further with U.S. radio. Cuban plans to put a high-powered station on 1040 kHz would seriously interfere with WHO Des Moines and even more with any Radio Marti broadcasts on that frequency. However, this would also cause major problems for broadcasters in other countries in the region and could cause the Cuban station itself to lose effectiveness because of mutual interference with WHO and Radio Marti.

The Cuban delegation to the Region II medium frequency broadcasting conference acknowledged that inclusion of 1040 kHz for Radio Marti in list B as a U.S. station granted it international recognition and legitimacy. The operation of Radio Marti and WHO can be technically compatible. I don't believe that there is any argument on this point.

It is possible that the Castro regime might attempt to jam Radio Marti with low-powered stations situated in the main cities and towns of Cuba. This would badly interfere with reception of Radio Marti, but might have a minimal effect on WHO. It is also possible that Cuba may do nothing. The VOA has been directing broadcasts to Cuba for more than 21 years, and Castro has rarely seriously tried to jam these broadcasts.

While some American observers may have doubts as to the possible effectiveness of Radio Marti, Cuban authorities have none. They fully recognize the potential impact of Radio Marti and take it very seriously indeed.

Cuba can mount a jamming effort. Many reports indicate preparation of stations, including a so-called Radio Lincoln, which could either jam or counterbroadcast. But the most recent and most authoritative statement was by Fidel Castro himself to the Union of Young Communists in Cuba on April 4. Speaking of Radio Marti, Castro said he hopes it won't go on the air but ". . . if in the end there is to be a dialectic confrontation between them and us, they with their subversive station and we with our [arguments in] response . . . we are prepared to give a suitable response. . . ." This suggests that Castro himself is threatening a stepped-up campaign of broadcasting to the United States.

Thus, while we cannot say for certain just what Cuba will, in fact, do, the stage seems set for counterbroadcasting rather than jamming. And we have no fear of anything Castro might say. That is the major difference between communism and democracy. Democracy thrives in the light of controversy; communism panics at the sound of truth.

Quite apart from the question of Radio Marti, we need to study the much broader problem posed by outlaw Cuban interference with U.S. radio. We support a proposal that has been made to assign a task force to study this problems and recommend what we might do in response. Deliberate, Cuban-caused damage to U.S. broadcasting in violation of international agreements should be considered an unfriendly act to which we should respond. The technical means exist to do that.

Those of us who have lived in a Communist state will know just how much Radio Marti can affect the lives of Cubans. For those of us who have not, it is an opportunity to offer the Cuban people hope and the means to make informed judgments on the actions of their own government. For a people bottled up in a system of oppression which they did not seek and cannot remove, that can be precious.

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